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Evaluating Principal Effectiveness: A Review of the Literature

Jerry Burkett

Abstract

The evaluation of a campus principal can be a challenging process due largely to the complicated factors that exist to capture an accurate assessment of a principal's leadership effectiveness. Generally, principal evaluations are conducted by district-level officials who often do not have the time or the resources to observe campus principals on a regular basis. Further, principal evaluation systems (PES) are designed to improve the practice of principals (Clifford & Ross, 2012; Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014a; Fuller et al., 2015), and there has historically been an acknowledgment that these evaluations do not always achieve this purpose. Therefore, the overarching purpose of an evaluation is to use defensible criteria to judge the worth or merit of a principal. Critical to this definition is "defensible criteria" as the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation's (Gullickson & Howard, 2009) recommends that personnel evaluations should rely on defensible criteria to ensure such evaluations are "ethical, fair, useful, feasible, and accurate" (p. 1). The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate the proposed themes found in principal evaluation systems to help determine set criteria that is most used to measure principal effectiveness.

Introduction

The job of school principal is challenging, stressful, and requires significant training and preparation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007; Cooley & Shen, 2003; Friedman & Miles, 2002; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Petzko, 2008; Pounder & Merrill, 2001).The workload of campus leaders continues to increase with new expectations for evaluation and supervision, changing legislative mandates, and mounting pressures for improved school accountability (Wells, 2013; West et al., 2014).

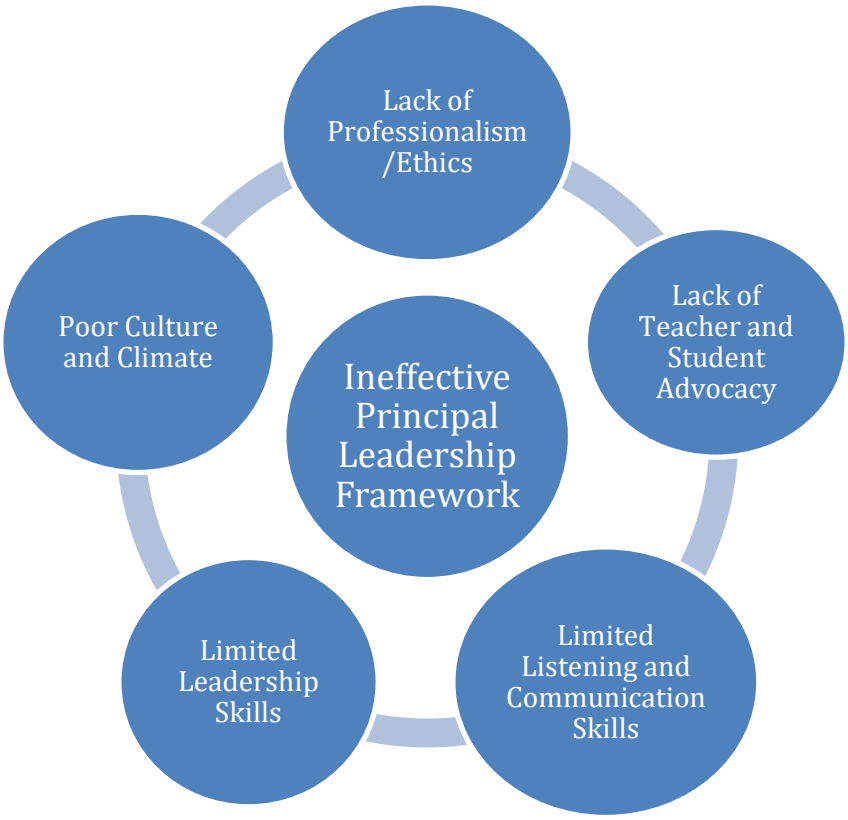
Due to these significant factors, the evaluation of a campus principal can be a challenging process due largely to the complicated factors that exist to capture an accurate assessment of a principal's leadership effectiveness. Generally, principal evaluations are conducted by district-level officials who often do not have the time or the resources to observe campus principals on a regular basis. Further, principal evaluation systems (PES) are designed to improve the practice of principals (Clifford & Ross, 2012; Davis, Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Fuller et al., 2015), and there has historically been an acknowledgment that these evaluations are not reliable methods for improving principal effectiveness.

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to discover the theories, themes, and systems related to *principal effectiveness* found in the body of literature. This review is written to support the development, validity, and reliability of a Principal Effectiveness Assessment Kit (PEAK) which can be used by school district leaders to help define, support, and develop school leaders' effectiveness in campus leadership. PEAK is a rubric-based, Likert-scale tool that was developed from the Ineffective Principal Leadership framework (Figure 1) that measured the characteristics of ineffective school leaders from the perspective of classroom teachers (Burkett, 2020). The results of the research "revealed" five key themes relevant to ineffective principal leadership. The themes include "a Lack of Professionalism and Ethics, Limited Leadership Skills, Lack of Teacher and Student Advocacy, Limited Listening and Communication Skills, and a Poor School Culture and Climate" (Burkett, 2020, p. 4). These emergent themes drive the concepts of the rubric design.

Figure 1

Ineffective Principal Leadership Framework



The Principal Effectiveness Assessment Kit (PEAK) is a 360° evaluation system designed to aid principal evaluators in improving and supporting principal leadership in their school districts. The approach of this evaluation tool is to place the evaluation criteria into the judgment of the classroom teacher with whom the principal directly supervises combined with the evaluation of the principal's supervisor (i.e., Executive Director, Assistant or Associate Superintendent), and the individual principal. The 360° evaluation of the principal using the PEAK would represent a more thorough, research-based representation of the effectiveness of the school leader.

Review of the Literature on Principal Effectiveness

Current Principal Evaluation Systems

With regard to Principal Evaluation Systems, Goldring et al. (2009) argued for analysis of the principal evaluation systems to support policymakers in determining what aspects of school leadership should be measured. Goldring et al. proposed several themes of principal leadership be included in the analysis; leader responsibilities, knowledge and skills of the leaders, processes of leadership, and outcomes of leadership. Davis et al. (2011) wrote, "Research on principal evaluation systems and policies is sparse and has not been of sufficient strength to provide a robust theoretical foundation" (Fuller et al., 2015). The criteria that are used for these evaluation systems are largely driven by state leadership standards and competencies but rarely capture how the principal interacts with teachers, the community, students, or how the principal governs their leadership and professionalism. Principal evaluation has long held promise for improving principal effectiveness, fostering learning and reflection, and increasing accountability for job performance (Orr, 2011).

Therefore, the overarching purpose of an evaluation is to use defensible criteria to judge the worth or merit of a principal (Fuller et al., 2015). Critical to this definition is "defensible criteria" as the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation's (Gullickson & Howard, 2009) recommends that personnel evaluations should rely on defensible criteria to ensure such evaluations are "ethical, fair, useful, feasible, and accurate" (p. 1). While the primary purpose of principal evaluation systems is to improve the practice of principals (Clifford & Ross, 2012, Davis; Fuller et al., 2015; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014a), there has historically been an acknowledgment that principal evaluations do not always achieve this purpose and that systems of principal evaluation need to be improved (Clifford & Ross, 2012; Davis et al., 2011; Stufflebeam & Nevo, 1991).

Two survey tools have been designed to measure the effectiveness of a principal's leadership (Player, 2018). The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) and the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). Both tools are designed as 360° survey assessments in which feedback from teachers, principal supervisors, and the principals themselves are incorporated to measure the leadership practices of targeted behaviors at the school. Both surveys are designed to provide feedback to the principal from three main sources (Player, 2018). The PIMRS was developed by Philip Hallinger and is a 360° survey assessment that focuses on ten instructional leadership areas represented in three primary domains: Defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and developing the school learning climate program (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The PIMRS has been used since 1982 and is found to be a reliable instrument to measure principal practice (Hallinger, 2003).

The VAL-ED measures six components and six domains of instructional leaders (Goff, 2015). The components include standards for student learning, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and performance accountability. The domains that are measured are planning, implementing, supporting, communicating, monitoring, and advocating (Goldring, 2009; Goff, 2015). Each component is based on portions of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL); both of which are important national standards for developing and evaluating university-level programs. The VAL-ED is administered as a 360° assessment, where teachers, supervisors, and principals provide specific evidence of each of the assessed domains. The VAL-ED has been shown to be a reliable evaluation system with documented psychometric properties (Porter et al., 2011). The VAL-ED

can help determine whether the principals are engaged in practices that are normally connected to student success and achievement.

Although principal evaluation holds great potential, few research or evaluation studies are currently available on the design or effects of performance evaluation on principals, schools, or students (Clifford & Ross, 2011). Available research studies raise questions about the consistency, fairness, effectiveness, and value of current principal evaluation practices (Condon & Clifford, 2010; Goldring et al., 2009; Heck & Marcoulides, 1996; Portin, et al., 2006; Thomas, 2000).

Conceptual Themes Measuring Principal Effectiveness

Student Achievement

School principals are important in setting the direction for a successful school (Tucker & Codding, 2002; Davis, et al. 2005). The literature has been clear in its aim to support practitioners in the continuous improvement process (Stronge, et al., 2008). The goal of this work is to identify effective processes so they can be replicated. This ensures that more schools become vibrant learning communities under the direction of effective leaders (Davis, et al. 2005). Student achievement can be used as a marker to measure the effectiveness of a principal. Highly effective principals are distinguished by making breakthrough gains in student achievement, including movement from “proficient” to “advanced” in higher performing schools, and a small number of additional student outcomes. A primary marker of success is the improvement of student achievement with additional student outcomes such as high school graduation, college matriculation, college readiness, or attendance rates. Ladd (2009) found an association between positive teacher working conditions and student achievement.

Hiring Practices

One obvious way through which principals affect the school community and student achievement, albeit indirectly, is through their influence on the hiring, development, and retention of teachers (Béteille, et al., 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004). This effectiveness can be measured through their ability to evaluate and manage human capital. These aspects include teacher hiring, evaluation, professional development, retention, leadership development, and dismissal. Principals shape teacher working conditions by acting as school-level human capital managers who have power to oversee school teacher hiring, placement, evaluation, and professional learning (Kimball, 2011; Milanowski & Kimball, 2010). To increase student achievement school-wide, principals should be measured by their ability to increase teacher retention and put support mechanisms in place to improve teachers effectiveness (Burkett, 2020).

Professionalism and Ethics

While the term professionalism is a complex and encompassing term, in the context of a school principal, professionalism should be viewed as a school leader who is driven to enhance equity and to ensure students are receiving opportunities (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). School principals, representing the primary leadership of the campus, should demonstrate these concepts of professionalism and ethical behaviors as the leader and manager of the school. This includes dressing professionally, having appropriate relationships with students and teachers, and making ethical decisions in the best interest of the school community (Burkett, 2020). McEwan (2003) wrote extensively on the concept of the school principal having strong values and ethics. Teachers want their principals to be ethical leaders who put people first and work with them rather than micro-manage them (Burkett, 2020). The leadership style of the campus principal can influence the professionalism and work ethic of teachers (Harlina, et al., 2021). Other large-scale

research confirms that teachers' retention decisions are sensitive to school leadership (Boyd et al., 2011; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ford, et al, 2019; Fuller, et al., 2016; Kraft, et al., 2016; Podolsky eta al., 2016).

While the literature is limited on the definition of principal effectiveness as it relates to professionalism and ethics, Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) note that understanding more about principal professionalism and ethics could lead to greater knowledge of how to encourage and retain them.

Leadership Skills

The body of knowledge has been clear in its aim to provide a pathway for practitioners for continuous improvement in the leadership process (Stronge, et al., 2008) Principal leadership is second only to teacher competency when determining the effectiveness of a school (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Marzano, et al., 2005). Several studies point to the critical role school leadership plays in a teacher's voluntary retention decision. Multiple scholars have discussed the significance roles of school principals and their leadership skills (Alvy & Robbins, 2005; Berlin, et al., 1988; Blackburn, 2009; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Portin, 2004; Robbins & Alvy, 2004;) while others focused on the significance of strategic leadership (Chen; 2003; Chernow, 1985; Glanz, 2006;), educational management leadership, and organizational management leadership (Dembowski, 2008; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Sashkin, 1988). While the literature is broad on the significance of principal leadership, few studies have emphasized the skills needed for school effectiveness and student achievement (Piaw, et al., 2014). However, Branch et al. (2013) noted that highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months (p. 63).

Leadership skills of school principals is often the key factor of difference between effective and ineffective schools (Blackburn, 2009). For example, a study of North Carolina teachers found that those who expressed intent to depart their schools most commonly listed school leadership as a key motivation for leaving (Ladd, 2009). School leaders should also practice the concepts of shared leadership and act openly and honestly (Sanzo et al., 2011).

McEwan (2003) identified 10 traits of highly effective principals, which include:

1. The Communicator: an effective principal is a genuine person who has the capacity to listen empathize, interact, and connect with stakeholders;
2. The Educator: an effective principal is an instructional leader with a deep knowledge of the principles of teaching and learning.
3. The Envisioner: an effective principal is motivated by their purpose and is focused on a compelling vision for the school.
4. The Facilitator: an effective principal has outstanding human relations skills and is able to form meaningful relationships with stakeholders.
5. The Change Master: an effective principal is flexible and realistic who can initiate and manage change.
6. The Culture Builder: an effective principal is one who builds a strong culture and models the way for stakeholders.
7. The Activator: an effective principal displays drive, motivation, enthusiasm, and humor.
8. The Producer: an effective principal is a results-oriented leader with a strong sense of accountability to stakeholders.

9. The Character Builder: an effective principal is a role model who demonstrates strong values and is an ethical leader.

10. The Contributor: an effective principal is a servant-leader who wants others to be successful. (pp. 174-175).

Maintaining School Culture and Climate

Factors related to teacher job satisfaction are directly related to school climate and principal support (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Dicke, et al., 2014). School climate encompasses individual attitudes, behaviors, and group norms that contribute to a safe environment where high-quality relationships are a priority (Baptiste, 2019; Polatcan & Cansoy, 2019).

Teachers reported in a 2020 survey having left a school due to poor climate and culture. The rationales for their departure included campus morale, school safety issues, lacking a mission and vision for the school, and a lack of encouragement (Burkett, 2020). Campus principals are vital in setting the direction for a successful school (Tucker & Codding, 2002; Davis, et al., 2005). Once effective processes have been identified, they can be replicated, ensuring that more schools become vibrant learning communities under the direction of effective leaders (Davis, et al., 2005).

There is an influence of school organizational culture on teacher performance. The influence between the principal's leadership style and the school's organizational culture correlates with teacher performance (Harlina, et al., 2021). Some researchers have also emphasized the importance of cultural leadership for school effectiveness and student achievement (Blackburn, 2009; Glantz, 2006; Hallinger, 2004; Karakose, 2008).

The Principal as a Teacher and Student Advocate

The job of a school principal is complex. Principals influence student learning and school performance through their practice, which includes knowledge, dispositions, and actions. Although principal effectiveness research is far from definitive (Davis, et al., 2011), information about principals' practice forms a reasonable base for principal evaluation and professional development designs. Principals must take effective action to reach these outcomes for student achievement and teacher effectiveness. When turning around low-performing schools, principals should receive a streamlined assessment of their progress in implementing the highest priority principal actions and school-wide practices that have been shown to differentiate rapidly improving schools. Based on seven years of experience working with leaders who enter high-poverty, low-achieving urban public schools, New Leaders for New Schools believes that a highly effective principal is distinguished by making breakthrough gains in student achievement, including movement from "proficient" to "advanced" in higher performing schools, and a small number of additional student outcomes. The highly effective principal also makes accelerated progress in implementing the principal actions and school-wide practices that differentiate rapidly-improving schools. Given that education is by nature a human capital effort, it is crucial that we explore and implement productive ways to think about educators' differential effectiveness. By thinking about and tracking our effectiveness, we will be able to learn from how well we are doing and devise new ways to improve our efforts–both of which are in educators' professional interests and in the interests of children. This learning cycle of studying principal and teacher effectiveness is especially important for human capital development organizations, in partnership with the school systems they serve.

Conclusion

The Principal Effectiveness Assessment Kit (PEAK) (Appendix 1) is a rubric-based, Likert-scale tool that is developed from researching the "characteristics of ineffective school leaders or the traits of "bad" or "poor" principal leadership" (Burkett, 2020). The characteristics, which are based on survey results from teachers' perceptions of the qualities of effective and ineffective principals (Burkett, 2020), will be used to develop the tool. The results of the research "revealed five key themes relevant to ineffective principal leadership. The emergent themes include a Lack of Professionalism and Ethics, Limited Leadership Skills, Lack of Teacher and Student Advocacy, Limited Listening and Communication Skills, and a Poor School Culture and Climate" (Burkett, 2020, p. 4).

However, whether school districts lack the resources for training their school principals on known continuous improvement models or perhaps because principals become complacent and comfortable in their leadership roles, teachers who demonstrate success in the classroom become frustrated with poor campus leaders and seek other opportunities. The financial cost of replacing and training teachers is expensive. The damage to the school culture and climate, too, often takes years to repair. While standardized test scores may demonstrate the "effectiveness" of the campus leader to produce an acceptable accountability rating, the damage to teachers, students, and the school community is often overlooked and immeasurable.

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